



an
interview
with the man
who drew
Walt Disney's
Bambi

A MASTER OF ANIMATION

For anyone who enjoys movies, a trip to Los Angeles is not complete without at least one visit to a film studio and the chance it brings of bumping into someone famous if you're lucky.

Being the editor of a film and video magazine as I am, your chances of not only bumping into someone famous but also being able to sit and chat about their work on a person to person basis are better than even as I found out when a request to interview "an animator"

at Walt Disney studio was granted.

On arrival in L.A., I was advised that lunch at the studio commissary had been arranged for my features editor and I and that two animators would be present. You can imagine how honoured I felt on being ushered into a semi-private dining room, to be introduced to none other than the now-retired Ollie Johnson and Frank Thomas and his wife.

The two gentlemen were a part of Disney's original hand-picked team of animators, both of whom had worked for Disney during the studio's golden years and had been key players in bringing animation as an art-form to its zenith in the 1940s..

They had worked on all the classic Disney animated feature films including *Fantasia*, *Snow White &*

The Seven Dwarfs, *Bambi*, *Pinocchio* and *Jungle Book*, and now they were having lunch with me at what was once Uncle Walt's private dining table; for a movie fan like me, it was indeed a dream come true.

"You're sitting where Walt used to sit," said Ollie, as if I wasn't already feeling rather over-awed by everything. "Roy would sit over here where I am. We'd usually eat out there," he added, pointing through a large window towards what looked like a busy cafeteria. "Occasionally one of us would be invited in here, usually so Walt could bounce ideas off us."

Whilst my features editor chatted with Frank, I had the pleasure of journeying down memory lane with Ollie as he recalled with affection one of the great visionaries of our century. "There have probably been a lot of geniuses around in my lifetime, but Walt was the only one I could say I knew. He dared to be different and had this amazing capacity to see things that had never been and make them happen."

Ollie first came to work for Disney during the great depression. An art school student who was working towards being a magazine illustrator, Ollie's plans were changed dramatically one day when the Disney studio contacted him and told him that Walt was looking for people like him with an art school background to do film animation. "Walt knew he was going to do *Snow White* and he wanted to upgrade the type of animation to do that. I got word that they wanted me to try, I did and I made it."

Ollie, who was employee number 235 at the Disney studio, puts it down to good fortune that he was one of the first animators, allowing him to establish himself as a one of the senior art staff at a relatively young age. "About a year after I came, there was a huge influx of talent. By the time we got onto *Pinocchio*, there were 1,300 animators. Walt would rent these houses all around the Glendale studio and guys would be working in the bathroom, bedrooms and kitchens.

"They were doing mainly story work, while the animators stayed in the studio where all their equipment was set up." The operation grew at a dramatic pace, and Ollie

believes it was Disney's uncanny knack of being able to know everyone in his employ personally that allowed him to keep in such close contact with everything that was going on. "I don't know how Walt handled all those people. They say that's the thing he'll be most remembered for, that he could control 1,300 artists and keep them from killing each other.

"No one in history had that many. Michelangelo and Leonardo had their apprentices, perhaps half a dozen of them and they say they were always squabbling. Yet that never happened at Disney, except

still living who never forgave him and there were plenty who were bitter at the time. It was a very bad thing because a lot of people lost their homes, their cars and it was really a bad time. I don't hold anything against the people who went out. Some do towards me because I didn't suffer the way they did. But the whole thing was inevitable."

So what exactly happened? As Ollie saw it, the government was backing unions at the time and President Roosevelt sent out a government agent who'd settled the Ford strike in Detroit to see if he could persuade the Disney staff

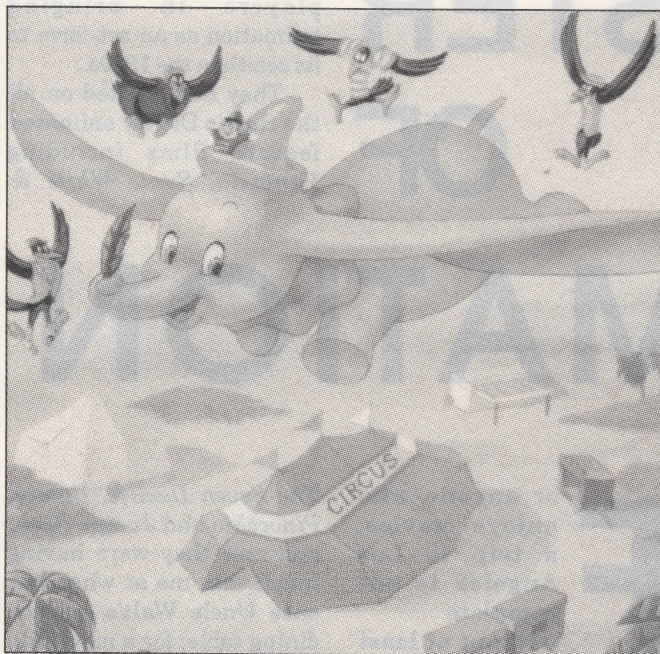
caused the most damage. "Dumbo" was to be on the cover of Time magazine, the first issue in December, 1941. You know what happened in the first week in December? The Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour and forced *Dumbo* off the cover. That cost Walt an extra million dollars which would have really helped. You can't blame Time magazine, but if it had happened a week later, it would have been all right. But the war breaking out hurt all of Hollywood."

It was a time of uncertainty for everyone, especially those like Ollie at Disney who, at that time, had no idea that they were in fact making cinema classics that would not only be revered by generations to come, but that they were making films which would pull in \$50 million plus at the box office decades after their initial release.

"When we were making *Snow White*, we didn't know if the film would make any money or whether, at the end of it, we were even going to have a job," said Ollie. "It was the depression times then." After the box office success of *Snow White*, the Disney workers began to realise that they had made a very special film and that, if they could follow its success with more quality animated features, the studio's survival was all but assured.

"From then on we were concerned about doing something good and keeping our jobs because we liked it so much. We never really thought anyone would be looking at these pictures forty or fifty or sixty years later, and buying all this Mickey and Donald stuff that they sell today."

Ask Ollie what he believes their greatest achievement was, and without a second thought



Dumbo

perhaps at the time of the strike.

"That started to happen around the time war came, some of the guys were drafted, Walt had to cut the salaries or lay people off, otherwise he would have had to close the place. That's when the trouble started. Many of those people would have left anyway. I suppose there are some people who are

who had refused to join a union to sign up. "He came out and admitted that we had a majority but he said we had to have a union. A lot of the guys wouldn't join and they went out."

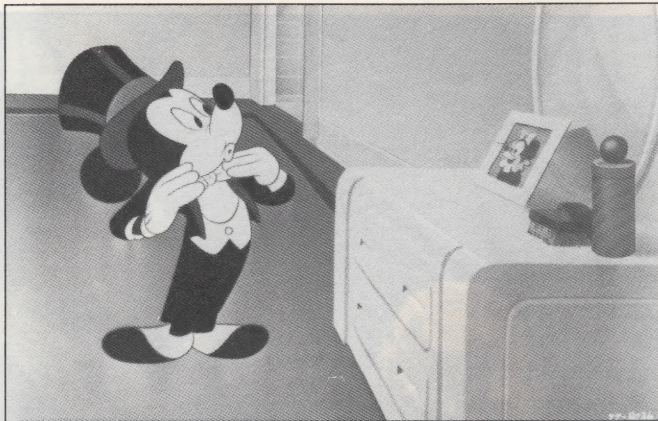
Surprisingly enough, the strike didn't radically effect production. *Bambi* experienced considerable delays, but it was World War II and an event which changed the course of that conflict that

he'll say *Fantasia*. "I think *Fantasia* really established Disney animation as the major art-form of this century. I may be going overboard on that, but we had outstanding drawings in that picture, and in *Pinocchio* and *Bambi*. I really think a lot of that work was of such a high calibre that it made animation the leading art-form of this century."

Ollie recalls that *Fantasia* happened after Walt had got together with classical conductor Stokowski to make a short film of *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*. "Because that cost so much money to do, he and Roy decided they couldn't send it out as a short because they'd lose too much money. They talked it over with Stokowski and decided to get some other pieces to animate to, put them all together and make a feature film."

After the pieces had been selected, Disney appointed a director, storymen and a team of animators for each sequence. "I was put on *The Pastoral Symphony* with Ward Kimble, Art Babbitt and a few others. I worked on the centaurettes and the Cupids; not the most exciting characters, but I had fun doing them. I liked drawing girls so I did all those close-ups of the girls in the hats and the Cupids putting lipstick on. I supervised all the cupid stuff, so I had a lot of animators working with me." Ollie worked on the picture for six months and recalls being rushed towards the end as Disney wanted to make an early start on *Bambi* and had to wait for him to finish *Fantasia*. "I guess I would have done more of the picture if it hadn't been for *Bambi*."

For Ollie, working on



Mickey's Golden Anniversary

Fantasia was one of the most memorable experiences of his career, having found the challenge of learning to work completely to music most rewarding. "There are a lot of ways it could be done and you had a lot of choices, so you had to do what you thought would be the most entertaining, just like you would with dialogue. You have to watch with dialogue that the head doesn't go all over the place. That's the first thing a new guy does, he draws the head wobbling about as the character speaks. Then he has to do it over, and so you have to be careful in the same way, when you're drawing to music."

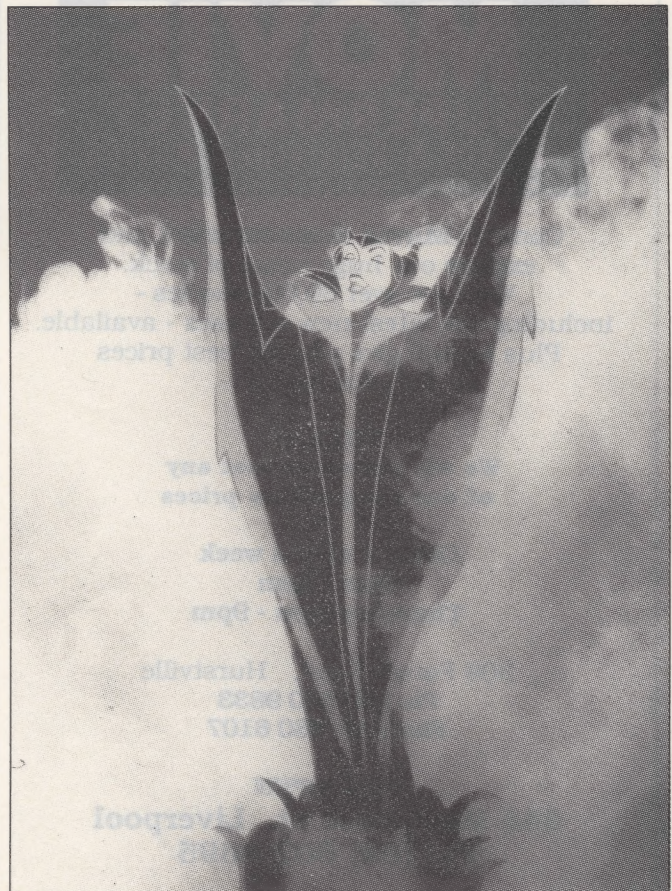
Though *Fantasia* was not a box office success, Ollie says that Disney always saw it as a masterpiece, albeit a misunderstood one. The same cannot be said of *Alice In Wonderland* which he recalls was never one of Walt's favourites. "I liked a lot of the animation in it but I agree with Walt that it didn't have any heart. He could never figure out really how to tie the thing together because it was so episodic, you get tired of it. If you see each sequence individually, they're very well done with good voices, nice characters and pretty good stories, but when you

see them all together, it's boring.

"Walt kind of bawled us out afterwards for not getting more warmth into it but I think he realised it just wasn't there in the story. But the kids love it now. They think we were on some kind of a drug. They say the same thing about *Fantasia*. 'What were you guys smoking?' they say when we go to art schools.

"What were you guys smoking? We didn't know anything about drugs then." As Ollie speaks, even about films like *Alice In Wonderland*, his loyalty towards the studio and the visionary who ran it shines through, and it comes as no surprise that he never contemplated moving to another animation studio like Warner Bros. who were producing Looney Tunes cartoons at the time. "They have done some real funny stuff, I love their Bugs Bunny, but I'm glad I didn't have to work on Bugs or Donald Duck all my life. I like the fact that I changed on each feature." Ollie says there was no rivalry between the two studios even though their short films had similar characters and their output was aimed at the same

Maleficent in *Sleeping Beauty* ... drawn by Ollie Johnson



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The cupids in Fantasia ...
drawn by Ollie Johnson

They're doing their own thing and aren't trained to make a picture just like we did.

"We told them it would be disastrous to do that, not that ours were something you couldn't copy, but if they just copied us, they wouldn't be expressing themselves, and that to me is what animation is all about. It is a form of art, of self expression. Even when working

to strict guidelines as you do when you work on a motion picture, the final image is the artistic creation of somebody."

It seemed like it had only been five minutes but the clock on the wall told us that two hours had passed and it was time for us to return to the hustle and bustle of Wilshire Boulevard. We said our good-byes, and thanked our friends at Disney for allowing us the opportunity to meet two of the nicest people in the movie business.

And we said a special "thank you" to Frank and Ollie, not just for their company and for sharing with us those wonderful memories over lunch, but for the hours of pleasure they have brought to millions of people around the world, ourselves included, through the magic that is forever Disney. *Stephen Yarrow*

market. "We never tried to top them because we were doing our own thing and they were doing their thing.

You tried to do the best you could and you weren't even thinking about anything they did.

"We'd look at their pictures and enjoy them; I'm sure we got ideas from them and they must have done the same with ours. Chuck Jones always says he wouldn't have got anywhere if it hadn't have been for Walt."

As you might expect, Ollie is thrilled that the Disney studio has returned to animation in recent years and is pleased that the move is already paying off.

"I wasn't sure that the new management would have the interest and see the potential in it. I think at first they didn't, but now Jeffrey Katzenberg who is in charge of motion picture production has fallen in love with it."

Ollie says that the studio calls in some of the animators from Walt's day every now and again, himself included, to give a little help and advice when it's needed, and he is thrilled that the modern day animators still care about "what the old guys think."

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A roundup of new films in production

Greed is out, families are in

The success in the last two last years of a number of Disney animated films - *The Little Mermaid*, *The Rescuers Down Under*, the re-released *101 Dalmations* and *Beauty And The Beast* have already taken in excess of \$200 million at the box office (*Beauty And The Beast* is still screening in the U.S.), while *Fantasia* will nett the studio in excess of \$90 million from its recent video release - has led all the major studios and film production companies to re-access their productions schedules and add a number of family oriented films to their slate.

Hollywood is convinced that the era of greed which symbolised the 1980s is being replaced by a return to a more conservative, family-centred outlook on life, which explains why the Disney animated films are being looked upon as the only guaranteed bankable films being made today. A key aspect in the success of the Disney films, particularly *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty And The Beast*, has been their music, and music will play a major part in the family films of the 1990s. "The animated picture has replaced the old form of musical," says composer Al Kasha, who is putting the finishing touches to the score of Fox's new animated feature, *Once Upon A Forest*.

Paramount, which says it used to own the modern musical with films like *Grease*, *Saturday Night Fever* and *Flashdance*, is all geared up to "get back to where it belongs" with a new contemporary musical on the drawing boards called *Into The Woods*. Meryl Streep and Billy Crystal have been pencilled in as the leads and Henson creatures will be predominant throughout the film. Also in pre-production is another musical called *Speakeasy*.

Bruce Beresford is all set to direct a film version of *Les Miserables* for Warner, which also has plans to film version of the stage musical, *Phantom Of The Opera*. Director Rob Reiner, whose *The Princess Bride* was a huge success in 1987, plans another similar film which is known only as "The Musical Project" at this stage.

Pleased with the success of *Feivel Goes West*, Universal has two more animated projects and a musical on the go - a film about dinosaurs called *We're Back*, and an animated version *Cats*, which will use the stage play with no changes whatsoever. Steven Spielberg and Andrew Lloyd Webber are collaborating on the project. Rappers Ice T and Ice Cube and their music will feature prominently in the musical, *Looters*.

Down the road at Disney, work is progressing on two more animated films - *Fantasia Continued*, in which the original *Fantasia* will be re-released with certain



The Rescuers Down Under

segments removed and replaced by new ones, and *Alladin*. Though *Fantasia Continued* won't be ready until 1996, *Alladin* will be released later this year. On the live feature film side, Disney has just finished shooting *Newsies*, a musical about newspaper boys, and *Straight Talk*, which features music written and sung by Dolly Parton, both of which will be released later this year. Work has commenced on *Swing Kids*, a musical in the old style about a band of jazz devotees living in pre-war Germany. Bette Midler is being tipped to star in another Disney musical project called *Traps*.

"Everyone is waking up to the same thing at the same time," said one producer. "Maybe it's because all the executives are baby boomers who suddenly understand family entertainment because they have families, or maybe they just understand that there is a real return to family entertainment and families in general."

Death Becomes Her

Back To The Future creator George Zemeckis is putting the final touches to his latest script - *Death Becomes Her* - about an aging Hollywood actress and her New York friend who stumble upon the fountain of youth. Meryl Streep plays the actress and Goldie Hawn the New Yorker who suddenly loses a lot of weight and starts to look absolutely fantastic. Who else in Hollywood but Goldie fits that description?

Columbus

More news on the Ridley Scott version of the Christopher Columbus story which is now in post production. According to producer Alain Goldman, the story is told through the eyes of Columbus' illegitimate son, who is trying to revamp his father's

tarnished image. Unlike the second film about Columbus which will be a swashbuckling adventure, this film will have very few sailing sequences as it concentrates more on the man behind the legend - played by *Green Card*'s Gerard Depardieu - and his fall from grace which resulted in him being brought from the Dominican Republic to Spain in chains.

Filming of the second film is now complete. Tom Selleck finally ended up playing the discoverer of America after Timothy Dalton backed out in October.

Tom Selleck

